A discussion of the benefits of the silent discussion writing activity

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The writing lesson I chose to share with the graduate students of RDG675 (summer, 2010) is called The Silent Discussion. This activity is backed by a wealth of research highlighting the benefits of using writing across the curriculum. The silent discussion offers teachers of a variety of subjects and age levels, an alternative option to the oral discussion for sharing, and developing, ideas and opinions.

**Procedure:**

1. In this activity, the teacher will identify a topic that they feel students would benefit from discussing. There are many possibilities across the curriculum including discussion of:

* Character traits and actions in a novel (during- or post-reading)
* Prior knowledge of events or vocabulary (pre-learning)
* Understanding of concepts (post-learning)

1. The teacher would constructs between four and eight questions or statements, intended to spark student thinking and discussion. These are known as *postings*.
2. Each posting is written clearly on a sheet of chart paper and posted around the room at ‘*response stations*’.
3. The students are organized into ‘*response groups’*, in which they will travel around the room visiting all, or some, of the posted questions/statements.
4. Students should be informed of the time limitations for each response station. These may be minimum or maximum time limits that will vary depending on the topic, and age level.
5. At the first response station, each student will read the posting, access his/her knowledge, and formulate a response. All responses are then recorded on the chart paper by the individual student. Responses may be questions, examples, exceptions, or reasons for agreement or disagreement.
6. Students will follow the silent discussion by reading the responses of their teammates. They may choose to present a response to one or more of these written thoughts.
7. Students are asked to move on to the following posting. They will read the posting, and the responses already written. They will then provide one or more response, to either the original posting, or any of the student comments. Again, they will follow the discussion, and may counter-respond to the written thoughts of their teammates.
8. This cycle continues until every student has had the opportunity to respond at each station.
9. At this point, students may be asked to return to stations visited earlier, read the discussion that followed, and provide a counter-response.
10. At the end of the silent discussion, the group at each posting may be asked to summarize the discussion points made by the class and the outcomes.

Options to Consider

There are many successful variations of this activity. You may choose to;

* Require *a thinking time* between the reading of the post and the writing of a response.
* Allow student to choose the postings they wish to respond to.
* Have students create the postings.
* Do/do not require students to sign their names to their responses. As an opening activity, you may wish the students to have a place to *throw out* ideas without having to *own* them.
* Play music to encourage the ‘no talking’ rule.

Silent Discussion Rationale

The rationale behind the silent discussion is to enable all students to respond thoughtfully to a series of questions or statements related to a topic that is being, or will be, studied. The silent discussion is not only considered a highly effective learning activity by many teachers, it is supported by much research. ([Garlikov](http://www.garlikov.com/writings.htm), Wells, 2010, Zamel, 1982, Zawaki, 2001) This activity requires all students to read a post and respond in writing. This is started during a *thinking time,* which allows students the time needed to fully access knowledge, and form thoughts and ideas, without being interrupted. Wells (1983) explains that when students write reactions to information received by reading, they often comprehend and retain the information better. Another advantage to the silent discussion is that the participants in the discussion no longer feel the need to rush to share the first emerging thought they have; the fast pace of the oral discussion is eliminated. Students also appear more likely to remain more focused on a single stand of the discussion, and consider that one strand more fully. Unlike the oral discussion, every student is able to participate in the silent discussion at his or her own pace.

In a silent discussion, participants present their response to the postings through writing. By using a written form of communication, the speed of the discussion is slowed and the time for meaningful reflection is significantly increased. Langer, 1986 explains that, “writing can lead to extensive rethinking, revising, and reformulating of what one knows. It can make a person aware of what is known, unknown, and even what needs to be known.”

Writing offers another advantage over oral communication, because it has been found to encourage participants to carefully consider what the information will convey to the reader(s). Zamel, 1982 writes that, “students should learn to view their writing as someone else’s reading.” In writing, the individual cannot rely on other communication tools, such as tone of voice or physical gestures. In written communication, the writer may read his posting in order to edit and revise. The asynchronous nature of this activity means the writer cannot adjust his presentation of information if he perceives the reader does not find the information clear. As a result, the participant learns to carefully consider word choice, and rereads his response to ensure clear organization of the information. Sorenson (1991) summarizes the many benefits of using writing as a learning tool by stating, “Across-the-curriculum writing finds its merit in removing students from their passivity. Active learners are active thinkers, and one cannot write without thinking.

The silent discussion requires all students to couple the element of reading to that of writing, to complete the task Therefore, there are several fundamental differences between the oral and silent discussion. Presenting information in a written form allows students the option to reread the information to clarify what is being presented. Students who thrive in a visual learning environment are given access to the information in their preferred modality and are therefore able to participate more fully in the discussion. The process of reading takes longer than that of listening, and offers a slower pace. The additional time may enable deeper thinking to occur. Sorenson (1991) offers, “students need the chance to assimilate information, make connections, and face whatever may still confuse them.”

Unlike the oral discussion, the silent discussion does not pressure an individual to share his thoughts in a ‘spotlight’ situation. The teacher can decide if each student will identify him/herself beside every response. This may change depending on the nature and sensitivity of the topic. Because the participant continues to reflect as they write, the possibility of spontaneous, negative rebuttal is greatly reduced. For those students who would often holdback during an oral discussion, the silent discussion enables students to express there opinions more openly.

Several researches studying the effect of talking and writing on student learning, have found that a combination of talking and writing provided the greatest improvements in learning. This is believed to be due to the talk serving to share and clarify knowledge, while writing is serving

to refine and consolidate knowledge with prior knowledge. However, this study addressed individual writing. The silent discussion combines both these best practices by incorporating writing directly into the discussion.

The silent discussion provides the opportunity to slow the discussion process, and therefore increases time to reading and writing, and thinking about the topic. Students provide deeper and more candid responses, and the possibility of negative rebuttal is diminished. Students appear to remain more engaged and focused in the ‘conversation’.Adding the Silent Discussion to my Teaching Repertoire

The mini writing lesson I chose to share with the graduate students of RDG675 (summer, 2010) is called The Silent Discussion. This activity was introduced to me by a fellow student in the literacy master’s program at Central Connecticut State University. The activity had a profound effect on me as I felt it drew a deeper involvement and commitment to the discussion than the oral discussion. I added this activity to my repertoire of ‘favorites’, and used it regularly within the kindergarten through grade two classrooms.

The silent discussion appeared to hold several advantages over the oral version. The differences noted seemed to vary by both topic or subject being studied and the student age level.

At the younger grades I began utilizing the activity as a means of accessing prior knowledge to a science or social studies topic. I observed that the silent discussion removed the urgency to ‘talk before thinking’; it also produced a wider range of responses, possibly as a result of deeper thinking and less piggybacking on the thoughts of others.

In one instance I was reviewing the differences between a mammal, a reptile and a bird. Each was posted on a sheet of chart paper with the question, “If you came across an unknown animal, how could you prove it was a mammal/reptile/bird?” Watching the students, it became apparent that they were carefully reading the responses of their classmates, and using this information to help retrieve their own background knowledge. I also noted that the use of put-downs had practically disappeared compared to the last time I was in the class, and comments to postings made by others were either informational (“If it has scales I would know for sure, because only reptiles have that”) or put-ups (“that reminded me that a bird can be mammal. Thanks!”). A number of posts aimed to correct misinformation, and did so in a mostly positive manner.

In the earlier elementary grades, I also used the techniques to discuss the touchy subject of making classmates feel unwelcome. I found the written responses were extremely candid, perhaps being written without the concern of being in the spotlight of peers. They also addressed a number of different angles to the discussion. The students did not appear to get hung up on one angle.

However, the most prominent observation I made in the early grades was that the focus f the lesson had shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered. The activity maintained a high level of student engagement throughout.

After this experience I began using the activity regularly. In the higher grade I found the activity helped students produce thoughtful responses. Different angles of a discussion would be discussed in more depth. In observing the students, I noted that those students, who would usually remain silent during an oral discussion, were sharing wonderful, deep insights into the topic. They no longer appeared over-shadowed by louder, faster, and more boisterous children.

In utilizing this activity, I have experimented across the curriculum with success in a variety of subjects and topics, across the grade levels. The silent discussion has also proven itself to be highly effective in different stages of the learning process, (pre, during, and post).

The silent discussion is a simple technique to heighten student learning that may be used in a wide variety of classrooms. It is successful in a range of teaching strategies at all points in the learning process. The activity is backed by much research supporting the use of reding and writing during discussion.

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